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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NASSAU 000722

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/09/2013

TAGS: PGOV PINR BF SNAR

SUBJECT: HUBERT INGRAHAM A YEAR LATER - NO EXCUSES, NO APOLOGIES

Classified By: POL/ECON Section Chief Brian Bachman, Reasons 1.5(b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) POL/ECON section chief met with former Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham on April 8 for a wide-ranging discussion of his tenure in office and current Bahamian politics. Ingraham freely gave his opinions about current political developments such as the upcoming Free National Movement (FNM) convention (thinks Tommy Turnquest will not be seriously challenged until next convention), Perry Christie's management style and character (says he's always been indecisive and lacks vision, but is a good man), Christie's Cabinet (thinks they are a collection of ambitious incompetents), the Progressive Liberal Party (PLP) government's legislative agenda (non-existent), and bilateral relations (hopes Embassy and Christie government can improve cooperation). He also vigorously defended his record during his ten years in office, claiming to have no regrets. Ingraham said he was unsurprised that the FNM lost last May, but only reluctantly agreed that he might share some of the blame for that loss. He said he was fully confident of his continued popularity and consistently dodged questions about his own political future. End Summary.

Out to Pasture?

¶2. (C) POL/ECON chief called on Ingraham at his Cable Beach office, which was relatively small but nicely appointed. Ingraham works there alone, with just a single employee, a part-time receptionist who left before the meeting concluded. He did not seem to be terribly busy, as the phone only rang twice during an hour and half long conversation, and neither call seemed work-related. His desk was near empty and his TV was on and tuned to CNN to watch war news. Ingraham freely admitted that he was not very active in Parliament and didn't anticipate that he would become more active any time soon. He said he still considers himself an FNM, and will vote with the FNM block, but is taking no role in ongoing party politics. When asked if he would complete his term or retire completely from politics, Ingraham said he hadn't given it much thought.

Perry and Hubert

¶3. (C) Ingraham quickly warmed to the political discussion however, and his love for the game sparkled in his eyes as we covered a broad range of topics. He told POL/ECON chief that he and Perry Christie remained good friends and said they talked by phone a couple of times a week. Ingraham said that they didn't always talk politics, but didn't avoid the topic either, and said that he offered advice to Christie regularly. He said that he believes Christie is a good man, and well-intentioned, but criticized his leadership style. Ingraham said "Perry has always been indecisive, and will always be indecisive. It's just the way he is. He can't change." He also alleged that Christie had no real vision other than a general desire to improve social programs, and nothing he really wanted to accomplish. Ingraham contrasted Christie with himself, saying he had come in with a definite agenda and moved decisively to accomplish it, whereas Christie "enjoys being Prime Minister" but doesn't really feel any urgency to get things done. Ingraham also said that Christie is, however, head and shoulders above anyone else in the PLP, and their only real option as leader. He is the only one with broad enough appeal to bring in swing voters, largely because he, unlike many other PLP politicians, is viewed as "trustworthy" and "solid". Even FNM's Ingraham said, don't fear for the country with Christie in charge, as he is unlikely to do anything rash. Combined with the fact that he loves the job, Ingraham sees Christie as firmly implanted in the PLP leadership and consequently, the PM's office. "It would take dynamite to get him out of that seat", said Ingraham, when asked if he thought Christie would run for another term.

A Sorry Bunch

¶4. (C) Despite his generally complimentary words about

Christie, Ingraham had nothing good to say about the rest of his government. He gleefully discussed at length PLP missteps since coming into office, highlighting most of all the fact that they "have no legislative agenda." Ingraham pointed out that the PLP Parliament has passed almost no legislation that hadn't been initially proposed by his government, and doesn't seem to be working on anything now. He also comprehensively criticized the PLP Cabinet, saying "Once you get past Perry, what have you got?" Ingraham said that the Christie Cabinet was inexperienced, incompetent and politically unschooled. He also said many of them harbor further political ambitions and have their own agendas, and shook his head at Christie's seeming inability to control them. Ingraham said he "never would have tolerated such behavior" in his own Cabinet. He sympathized with Christie, however, noting how, under the Westminster system, it is difficult to just remove a Cabinet Minister or discipline him effectively, as all it may do is create a political enemy who retains his seat in Parliament. Ingraham acknowledged that this had never stopped him, but claimed, with a mischievous gleam in his eye, that that was "because I was always confident -- confident that I had the support of the people. Perry doesn't have that confidence." In fact, Ingraham said he believed the PLP had squandered its mandate almost immediately and no longer enjoyed the support of the people, because of its inaction and political stumbles. One political blunder he highlighted was the PLP's apparent hostility toward the civil service, whom they believe to be in bed with the FNM after ten years of FNM rule. Ingraham said "They don't even realize that the public service overwhelmingly voted for them (the PLP) in the election, and now they're alienating this key block of swing voters."

FN M Needs Unity

15. (C) Ingraham acknowledged that just because the PLP was losing support didn't mean that people were ready to turn back to the FNM. He said that the FNM had a lot of work to do before it would be competitive politically again. What was most needed, he said, was unity. According to Ingraham, many of the FNM's wounds were self-inflicted, and he had harsh criticism for former ministers Algernon Allen and Tennyson Wells, who attacked the leadership process that saw them unsuccessfully challenge Tommy Turnquest, Ingraham's hand-picked successor and then complain bitterly in public about Ingraham's stacking the deck. Ingraham vehemently (but unconvincingly) denied influencing the leadership process, and defended Turnquest as "the best man for the job at the time." He did criticize Turnquest's decision to accept a celebratory party financed by a contractor doing business with his Ministry, saying it gave the PLP and Allen and Wells a convenient target. Ingraham said it was an "unfortunate decision", because until then no one could say Tommy wasn't honest." He thought it was very damaging to Tommy's chances in the election.

16. (C) Nonetheless, Ingraham predicted that Tommy would survive any leadership challenge in the upcoming May FNM convention. In fact, he predicted that no serious challenge would emerge at this convention. According to Ingraham, those most likely to challenge Tommy Turnquest would lie low at this convention, since they don't really have any desire to be the leader of an opposition party for the next four years, and would bring out their serious challenge at the next convention, which he predicted would be in another 18 months, by which time the next election would already be in sight on the horizon. Ingraham quickly and confidently rattled off who he believed the new FNM leadership team would be after the election: Turnquest as leader, former Minister of Industry and Development Zhivargo Laing as deputy leader, former Attorney General Carl Bethel as party chairman, and former legislators Johnley Ferguson and Darrin Cash to round out the leadership slate, a group he characterized as "young, energetic and talented." With respect to Brent Symonette, who has publicly ruminated about challenging for the leadership, Ingraham dismissed his chances, but denied that Symonette's race (he is white) had anything to do with it. Rather, Ingraham said it was his personality and lack of appeal outside the bounds of his wealthy constituency. In fact, he said the best thing that could happen would be for Symonette to challenge for the leadership, because he "would be beaten so soundly that it would shatter all his illusions." Ingraham confidently predicted that the FNM would win the next election, saying Christie's PLP "already had the markings of a one term government."

No Mistakes

17. (C) When asked if he had any regrets from his ten years in office, or if he would do anything differently if given the opportunity, Ingraham quickly responded "Absolutely not!" He said he was a contented man, and that he had accomplished virtually everything he set out to do. On further reflection, he admitted that he wished that the FNM

leadership transition had been handled better, but he deflected blame for that, saying that it should have been done earlier and smoother, but he was delayed by FNMs who kept urging him to put it off and trying to get him to run again. With regard to the failed constitutional referendum, which many point to as a key factor in the FNM's electoral loss, Ingraham denied that it was a factor. In fact, he said, he had already become convinced by January of 2002 that the FNM would lose the general election, and scheduled the referendum because he was confident that it would pass and would give the FNM momentum going into the election. He admitted to being shocked when the PLP came out against the referendum, since they had all voted for the various amendments in Parliament, but refused to characterize it as a political miscalculation. Ingraham showed a glint of anger at the suggestion that some in the FNM blamed him for the electoral loss, and fired back. He strongly defended his record and claimed that he was still the FNM's most popular politician. He pointed out that he had won in 1992 and 1997 by strong margins, and that it was only after he left the leadership that the FNM lost. According to Ingraham, the FNM asked him to step away from the campaign not because he was unpopular, but because his popularity left Turnquest in his shadow. Finally he did grudgingly admit that he might have to share some of the blame for the FNM loss. "I guess if I take credit for the victories I also have to take credit for the losses," Ingraham said, but added with fire in his voice, "And no one can deny that I was responsible for the victories in 1992 and 1997!"

Bilateral Relations

18. (C) Ingraham also raised his concern with publicly reported spats between the Embassy and the PLP government. He offered no criticism of the Embassy, but said "I hope things are patched up and calm down. We need a strong bilateral relationship." He offered some mild criticism of the GOCB's handling of the bilateral relationship. In particular, he obliquely criticized Christie by saying that under his government, ministers would not have been given as much leeway. He also said he believed Foreign Minister Mitchell could have handled the controversy over the Ambassador's remarks at the Joint Task Force meeting in December better, and chalked it up to "inexperience and pride." Ingraham acknowledged, that with the exception of what he termed "the Defense Force allegations", none of the issues raised by the Ambassador were new or should have been a surprise. In particular, he ruefully admitted that his own government had failed to fulfill its promise of several years to create a national drug control strategy, but said that it was his understanding that it had been "nearly done" when he left office.

Cagey About the Future

19. (C) When asked about his own political future, Ingraham, dodged artfully. He said that he had only run for MP this last election at the urging of the party, and considers himself retired. Ingraham claimed that he had no intention of defending his seat in 2007, and does not intend to take an active role in the upcoming FNM convention. When asked directly if he would ever consider reentering politics, Ingraham dodged the question completely. He did admit that various people within the FNM continued to push him to retake the leadership, however, and refused several clear opportunities to say he was definitely not interested.

Comment

10. (C) Supremely self-confident, unapologetic and, dare we say, arrogant as ever, Ingraham still has a forceful and formidable presence. Currently inactive in Parliament and largely out of the public view, he obviously is still keeping a close eye on political events both inside and outside the party, and we have little doubt that he still has influence within the FNM if he chooses to use it. Ingraham is still a relatively young man for a politician, and seems to have little desire to return to his former trade (the law). If the Christie government continues to struggle against a weak economy and the widespread perception that it is inactive, and Bahamian voters begin to feel a little nostalgia for the strong hand on the tiller, we wouldn't be surprised if Hubert Ingraham reemerges as a potential "savior" for his party and The Bahamas. End Comment.